

ADOPTION

Megan Lindsey, *editor*
Chuck Johnson, *editor*

ADVOCATE

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What's Next for Adoption Advocates?

BY CHUCK JOHNSON

Adoption has shaped my entire life, personally and professionally. As the son of an adopted person, I watched my father move from feeling a sense of quiet shame about his adoption to a place where at last – late in his life – he could celebrate it and recognize the good it had done for him. As a father by adoption, I've walked with my children through both joy and struggle, including the occasional struggle linked to adoption.

As a social worker and a longtime advocate for adoption, I do my best to serve all those impacted by adoption. I love the institution of adoption and feel called to do this work, and I have been blessed throughout my career to serve children who need safe, loving, permanent families.

Every year during National Adoption Month, all those who are touched by adoption have much to celebrate. At home with my family – and with my “work family” at National Council For Adoption – we celebrate adoption every day, not just during the month of November. Adoption is a time-tested institution that has undoubtedly benefited countless children. But as we celebrate its positives, its accomplishments, and its great potential, we must also consider the ways in which we can make adoption work better for all – for the young birth mother or birth father facing an unintended pregnancy who decides adoption is the right choice, for the foster and adoptive families hoping to provide loving homes for children, and for the infants and children who will be adopted and grow to adulthood with adoption as part of their history and identity.



National Council
For Adoption

225 N. Washington Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 299-6633
www.adoptioncouncil.org

Adoption is constantly evolving, and as it does, our advocacy must shift too. For those of us that advocate for children and families through adoption, it's our responsibility to make sure we are always responding to the latest research, the shifting culture, and the experiences of those who place their children as well as those who adopt and are adopted. Today, adoption advocates have to be constantly aware of this delicate balance. We cannot celebrate all that is good about adoption without also acknowledging the needs of those who are struggling and need our support. This is how we can best commit ourselves to studying and understanding adoption, trying to promote best practices, and helping to meet the needs of all people affected by adoption.

Adoption used to be viewed as a one-time legal act joining a child with a forever family. But while it is still that in one sense, it must also be seen as an ongoing experience. Adoption can be a wonderful way to provide a home for a child and build a family, and yet we have to recognize that it carries with it unique challenges, responsibilities and joys. In my work, I meet many adopting families and adoptive professionals, and I think as a group we understand this truth better than ever before. This is one reason NCFA's mission has expanded, over the years, to acknowledge that the ultimate goal of adoption is to help children not just *find* loving families, but to promote policies and practices that help children *thrive* in those families.

After all these years working in adoption, I have become a visible and outspoken advocate for adoption. But several years ago I realized that, in my efforts to be an advocate, I was focusing too much on just the benefits and positive outcomes experienced by the majority of those affected by adoption. It's not that I was unaware of the less positive experiences, but at the time it was easier and more comfortable to focus on those good outcomes. While I always supported compassionate counseling for women considering adoption and strong pre-adoption education for prospective adoptive families, and advocated for quality post-adoption services, I didn't always direct focus to these concerns as I do now. I was too focused on the worthy goal of getting a child in need into a family.

I know it might sound strange to some that an adoption professional can be too focused on the child! The nature of this work must be child-centered first if it is to truly serve children in need. But adopted children will one day be adopted adults. When we only focus on adoption as it serves infants and young children, we lose sight of the important fact that the needs and perspectives of adopted individuals can change profoundly over time. We not only want to see a child find a good family; we want to help ensure they have a safe, secure, and permanent role in their family into adulthood and throughout their life.

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Even the basic right and need of U.S. citizenship is not automatically guaranteed to every internationally adopted person, a vital issue that NCFCA has been involved with since 2008, and one we will continue to press in our advocacy on Capitol Hill. Over the years we have published many policy papers, joined working groups, and met with hundreds of legislators, urging them to amend the Child Citizenship Act and close the loophole that leaves a small but still unacceptable number of intercountry adoptees vulnerable to citizenship problems and even deportation. All those who consider themselves advocates for intercountry adoption should also be speaking up on behalf of adoptees in the U.S. to get this citizenship issue fixed. This is a great and unmet need – a broken promise we made to protect and serve adoptees – and we must address it now.

Earlier this year I attended The Hague Special Commission on the Practical Implementation of The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. A large portion of the meeting was focused on the importance of preserving records for adoptees, as well as how to prepare for and assist them in search and reunion – something almost unheard-of in intercountry adoption years ago. Adoption is constantly changing, often for the better, as the community tries to respond to the ever-shifting landscape and what the latest research as well as decades of experience can teach us.

Because adoption is a client-centered social service, it is always evolving to better serve the clients involved. Thanks to generations of adult transracial adoptees sharing their experiences, we now know far more than we once did about the importance of helping adopted individuals understand their racial and cultural identities, even when they are separated from their families, countries, and/or cultures of origin due to adoption. Adopting across racial and cultural lines requires an additional commitment of adoptive parents. It will be their responsibility to help their children learn about, explore, and develop meaningful connections with their history and culture of origin, as well as understand and cope with the ongoing legacy of racism in our country. Many adoption agencies have improved the preparation and education they offer to prospective adoptive families in this area, but far more work needs to be done in preparing parents to adopt transracially. Families stand to benefit when we recognize that transracial and transcultural adoptees have a right to their history and their heritage, and that transracial adoption brings with it a unique set of challenges that parents must be aware of before they adopt.

The growth of domestic open adoption, too, has changed the landscape drastically. Open adoption often means ongoing contact between birth and adoptive families. That may require the occasional involvement of the adoption agency or attorney, who can help mediate and provide asked-for

guidance. The Internet can help facilitate this contact – and sometimes create it where it did not formerly exist. We know that adoptees often benefit from knowing more about their birth families, maintaining those lifelong connections, and having access to more complete medical and social background information.

Even as we become more open about the challenges in adoption, the reforms we need to make, the services we need to expand, we have seen an increasing number of studies that support the instinctive belief we already had that children do best in loving, permanent families. Our more nuanced understanding of the long-term physiological and psychological effects of institutionalization, trauma, emotional and physical abuse, and neglect has helped adoption services providers and child welfare advocates push for the kind of comprehensive post-adoption services and support many families need. More and more adoption agencies have staff members who are informed about these issues and can specifically address the unique needs of adopted children and adoptive families.

While many adoption professionals are working hard to provide the support adoptive families need, here in the U.S., we continue to hear more and more stories of adoption disruptions and the unregulated, underground “rehoming” of children whose adoptive parents have given up responsibility for them. We can and must do more, as adoption professionals, to ensure that every prospective adoptive parent understands the “forever” commitment of adoption – a commitment they make to their child that should endure through difficult times as well as joyful ones. The rehoming of children and the unregulated trafficking that occurs in a fraction of cases is an abomination, and has harmed too many children – even one is one too many. We need to educate in advance, train, and support families with the services they need before their problems loom so large that they turn away from the commitment they made to their children through adoption.

One thing National Council For Adoption has increasingly focused on over the past decade or so is to identify just *why* families are struggling. Of course every child and every family is different, but from talking with families and studying this issue, we have found some common experiences: post-adoption visits often come too late, and are not frequent enough; intervention and services for children who need them are either unavailable or not recommended soon enough; and both parents and educators are under-informed about the very real effects that past trauma, grief, abuse, or neglect may have on a child’s ability to learn and thrive. To address these needs, much of NCFA’s research and advocacy is focused on advocating for expanded and strengthened post-adoption services for families.

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To succeed and thrive, we know that families need more education and follow-up, and – just like birth parents – adoptees may need support at various points throughout their adult lives as new concerns present themselves and old ones resurface. While many agencies are already involved in facilitating adoption reunions and supporting those involved, we should do more to help adult adoptees find out about their history if they choose, and advocate for adoption competency among social workers and mental health professionals who may need to help adoptees process what they learn and make peace with things they are unable to discover.

We also need to work legislatively to get the necessary funding and research so that states can identify resources for both adoptees and adoptive families, and provide more where there are gaps in services. Both research and experience tells us that if this is not part of your adoption advocacy, if you cannot provide the post-adoption services and follow-up that adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families need, then you should not be working in the field of adoption.

It takes time and commitment to develop a long-term strategy, but it is imperative that we do so, recognizing that adoption does not end at placement. Adoption advocacy, practice, *and* legislation must recognize and support this notion of adoption as a lifelong experience, a lifelong process. While adoption has a long and philanthropic history, we can and must do more to ensure that we are serving *everyone's* long-term interests.

We know from research and from the anecdotal experiences of the millions of adoptive families what a life-changing blessing adoption is to them, but we also know there are some who did not benefit from their adoption experiences. We hear stories of birth parents, particularly those from past generations, who felt pressured into adoption or chose it freely only to feel shut out from their children's lives. We hear from adoptees whose families might have lacked the education or the empathy to understand how their adopted children felt. It is essential that we face up to the fact that adoption does not always serve everyone's best interests, even as we acknowledge the many successes.

The goal of adoption *cannot* simply be a short-term, immediate goal – to get a child into a family. Adoption service providers cannot ever compromise in practice – not just following every law and policy to the letter, even policies they may not like or agree with, but also exercising due diligence in every single adoption to ensure that everything is carried out in that individual child's best interest, from the start of the adoption proceedings. Support should be given to both birth parents and adoptive families for as long as needed post-adoption. If an agency cannot commit

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to this – and make this its highest goal – it should not be involved in adoption.

Finally, those of us who care about meeting the needs of children in need should always be thinking about how we can best connect and collaborate with other individuals and groups to serve our overall mission. Most often, this will mean working with those we generally agree with. But it can also mean reaching out to and finding allies in those with whom we don't always see eye to eye. We share some common ground with all those who care about adoption, how it is practiced, and how best to serve children and families (both birth and adoptive). In my years of working in this field, I have always looked for and tried to forge partnerships and collaborative relationships with a broad and diverse group of advocates, policymakers, and professionals. I know this important collaboration must continue if we are going to be ethical and effective advocates for children and families.

My whole life has been impacted by adoption, from its role in my father's life, to the formation of my own family, to the work I do each day. Though I have spent many years in this field, though I've known many challenges as well as joys as an adoption advocate, I've lost none of my convictions about the good of adoption. It has existed in one form or another for centuries, and I know it will go on. It's important to recognize that we lose nothing by examining its shortcomings as well as its benefits. Only by facing and understanding our past failures and limitations as advocates can we make adoption stronger and protect it as a viable option for countless future children.

I count myself truly fortunate to have been involved in this work for so long, and I know that the practice and institution of adoption can only benefit from closer examination, tough questions, and passionate recommitment to addressing the needs of those we serve. Those of us who claim the mantle of "adoption advocates," especially those privileged enough to have gained decades of experience in this field, need to be on the front lines calling for and advocating for better support and services for all those affected by adoption. That is my pledge – for myself as well as those who work with me at NCFCA – and I hope you will join us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuck Johnson serves as president and CEO of the National Council For Adoption. Prior to joining NCFCA, Chuck served 17 years with a licensed child-placing agency in Alabama, including eight years as its executive director. His recent citations include CBS News, *Good Morning America*, CNN International, FOX News Channel, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and *Family News in Focus*. Chuck is a graduate of Auburn University with a degree in Social Work and holds a Masters degree from Birmingham Theological Seminary. He is a father by adoption and lives with his family in Maryland.



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